

Framed Wings

A Smoke Wade Adventure by Robert J. Hogan

“SMOKE” WADE, son of the Arizona ranges, inspected his pinto Spad lovingly, but sadly. The mechanics had been at work patching the torn fabric where Spandau steel and Archie shrapnel had blasted away the shining covering.

Slowly he unfolded a note which he had found in the cockpit, and his eyes swept over the typewritten page:

A fine squadron commander you make. A great example to the pilots under you. Why don't you go out and take your turn of hell over the lines once in a while instead of sending someone else? Most of us think you're yellow.

The note was unsigned. Smoke Wade smiled a sickly smile. His lone missions over the lines were launched in the strictest secrecy. They were against the wishes of the colonel. Colonel McGill had warned Smoke repeatedly about them. Still, Smoke couldn't keep from going on a wild, and to the Archies devastating, cruise now and then—just to get that something out of his system.

In spite of that smile, Smoke was hurt. The note was like a stab of a knife in his heart. If there was one thing on which Smoke Wade prided himself it was the fact that his subordinates enjoyed him as their superior—liked to soldier under him. And now this note.

His head dropped and his eyes were upon the ground in half shame. Who could have sent the note? And was it the opinion of the whole squadron which he commanded? He tried frantically to force the idea from his mind. No, it couldn't be. There had been no sign of it before. Still, he couldn't be sure.

A voice awoke him from his thoughts as he stood beside his pinto Spad. He'd named the Spad “Jake” after his favorite pinto pony back on the range. And painted the Spad like him, too—a pinto Spad.

“Colonel McGill wants to see you right away, sir,” announced the orderly who had come down the tarmac unseen.

Smoke answered the salute, stuffed the note into his shirt pocket and walked in the direction of headquarters.

“Captain,” announced the colonel, “there's a tough job ahead for some of your outfit. Just received the orders. Back at position”—he bent low over the order sheet—“the numbers of the location seem a little blurred. Oh, yes. I can make it out now. These orders arrived before I got in the office this afternoon. Stetson was on duty at the outer office and handed them to me when I came in.”

Colonel McGill raised the paper with the orders again. “But to go on with the orders for tomorrow. There's a battery of enemy howitzers that are holding up our advance. Everything has been wiped out but that battery. They must go, captain. Orders. Ask for volunteers tonight at mess. Only two Spads are to go. We'd send light bombers, but they're too slow. We'd send more Spads, but the gorge where these howitzers are entrenched is heavily guarded by Archies, and I believe that two will have a much better chance than a whole flight or more. With what few light bombs two Spads can carry, the hits must be perfect. See that your best men go.”

“Yes, sir.” Smoke snapped a salute to his superior. “I reckon that battery won't be there twenty-four hours from now, sir. What time do these two take off?”

“At ten o'clock,” announced the colonel.

Smoke hesitated meditatively.

“Why so late, sir, I wonder?”

Colonel McGill shook his head. “Can't say, captain. Just orders. Evidently those higher up who issued these orders, think that will be the best time. That's the only explanation I can make for it.”

“I reckon' maybe they know best,” admitted Smoke as he left.

But on the way to the mess that evening his feet dragged. There were two things that had him stumped. The first was the note. How many of his

squadron really felt that way about him? The other was his curiosity as to why the orders had come through for ten o'clock instead of at dawn, which was usually the most advantageous time to strike at a position of that kind.

HIS towering bulk was framed in the doorway as his eyes swept the hall where the men under him were taking their evening meal. Often Smoke had stood in that doorway and wondered. Wondered how many of those young, eager faces would be there at the next evening mess.

At the same instant that someone near the door shouted : "Attention!" Smoke boomed his command in a voice that was soft, but carried its sound to every corner of the room.

"Ease, men." Then, in his calm Western drawl that did not betray in the slightest degree the tumult within him, "I reckon we got a mighty tough job for tomorrow morning."

Men turned nervously, shifted from one foot to the other. Veteran airmen stood like statues. They knew it was for them. Tough jobs were for the best, the veterans of the air.

"Got a job for two at ten tomorrow morning," Smoke announced in that slow, drawling voice, "battery of howitzers got to be blown off the earth. Two Spads. The best got to go. I'm askin' for—"

"You would," snapped a voice to his right. Smoke turned his head sidewise slightly and saw the pilot who had cut him short.

"Stetson," Smoke's drawl hid his rage, "I reckon you better hop up here beside me and tell me what you're aimin' at by that crack."

"Sure I'll tell you," Stetson blustered, making his way toward his superior. "Just because I'm better than most around here and got to be a flight commander, isn't any sign that you're going to pin this job on me. Yeah, I know. I've heard it often enough. Your old line. 'I'm askin' for volunteers, and, Stetson, I'm looking at you.' Why don't you go out yourself sometimes? Do you think you're about the best thing around here? Or maybe you're yellow."

Smoke suddenly realized that he knew who had sent that note. Who had written it and dropped it into the seat of his Spad. It didn't matter so much now. Not as long as it was Stetson who had done it. He'd expect that of him.

Especially since Stetson had been taken in several times by bets at which Smoke Wade had beaten him. And of course Stetson had been lying when he had written that the rest of the squadron felt as he did about their commander.

Smoke's eyes roved over the faces in the mess before him. He suddenly realized that there wasn't a friendly expression on the face of any pilot in the room, with one exception. That was Quinn. There was pity in young Quinn's face. Pity, but that was all.

"And I reckon all the rest of you birds feel the same way about me as Stetson?" Smoke ventured. Surely that would bring someone forward to stand up for him. His heart sank like a stone in a mill pond. Not even Quinn, for whom he had risked himself in the past, would stand up for him.

"All right. I reckon I'll take the job myself this time," ventured Smoke. He was hurt to the quick. "You fellows might's well get some sleep tomorrow. This is the only job that our outfit is pulling off, so take a vacation."

"I knew you'd take it like that," snarled Stetson with a sneering laugh. You always think you can do more than any two of the rest of us. Always have. Well, maybe you'd like to make a bet that you get that battery tomorrow."

Smoke whirled on him. A bet had, been proposed. Bets were his meat, and he had the luck of the devil, usually.

"I reckon I sure will take that bet," he announced. "Name your stakes, Stetson."

"Twenty-five thousand francs," Stetson astonished him by saying. "Or maybe you haven't got that much money to your name?"

Smoke Wade did some lightning calculations in his head.

"I'll be takin' that bet, Stetson," he drawled in even tones.

"And just to give you a break," Stetson went on, "we'll make the bet this way. Twenty-five thousand francs that not a man from this field gets that battery."

But, in so doing, Stetson overstepped himself. He had suddenly caused Smoke Wade to wonder by that last remark.

"Check," said Wade.

SMOKE pondered his predicament. From the acts of the pilots at mess that night it had been

obvious that they were all in agreement with Stetson. They thought him unjust and yellow. But one thing Wade had missed. He had missed the hilarious laughter that had burst from the throats of the pilots in mess that night as soon as they were sure he was out of hearing.

Wonder and curiosity at that last remark of Stetson's caused him to leave the field that night in search of information. There was something about the whole affair that smacked of too much assurance on the part of Stetson.

Smoke spent most of the night wandering through several nearby towns, hanging about the various bars and asking questions of pilots from other fields with whom he came in contact.

Shortly after dark it began to rain. At first it began as a steady drizzle. Then it increased to a torrent, and throughout the night, it stormed continuously. And when Smoke Wade learned certain things he began to smile as he heard the rain making a regular morass of the surrounding country.

Long before ten the following morning, Smoke Wade, drenched to the skin, was seated in the cockpit of his pinto Spad, while the Hisso warmed throatily.

"It's takin' a terrible chance," warned the hangar sergeant, "havin' them guns taken off to lighten the plane."

Smoke grinned down at him.

"Now you have no cause to worry, I reckon. Got to carry just as many bombs as I can get into this crate. Don't worry. Jake and me, we'll be all right." His hand unconsciously caressed the old six-gun that hung at his right leg. "Mr. Colt, and Jake, and me. We'll get through all right."

Out in front of him was the vacancy to which the mechanic had referred. Smoke had taken off both the Vickers guns, so that he could carry as much weight in the way of bombs as possible. He'd need them all going over alone.

"And not a word to the colonel, remember."

"Yes, sir."

The Hisso was nearly ready for the take-off. Smoke caught sight of a figure running wildly down the tarmac. He recognized Quinn. He was running as though his very life depended upon it. Smoke waited a moment.

"Smoke—captain," Quinn blurted out, "I've been looking all over for you." His eyes were dark

from sleeplessness. "I couldn't let you go without telling you. It's a frame-up. It was Stetson who got up the idea of framing you on a bet. I guess every man at the field has some money in on it. We're all for you, Smoke. But it was meant to be a sort of joke on you."

Quinn was panting for breath. Smoke's big hand patted him softly on the shoulder, and in Smoke's eyes was a light of thorough understanding. It had been a joke. The men of his squadron really didn't feel that he was yellow, after all. Just a joke. But there was the bet. He'd have to win that bet, anyway. Besides, it was mostly up to him to get the battery of howitzers.

"But—but, Smoke," pleaded Quinn.

"You don't understand it all. The—"

"There now, Quinn," grinned Smoke, patting him again, "don't you worry about my not knowin'. What do you think I was rustlin' around in the rain for last night if it wasn't to find out all about it? Sure, I know. Orders came through, that the French field over at Ramou were to go after the same thing, only earlier this morning. Stetson must have gotten hold of that news in the colonel's office yesterday and that's what he's making his sure bet on. We'll fool him."

Quinn tried desperately to hang to the side of the cockpit—to say more. But Smoke gently pushed him away as he batted the gun open and spun his pinto Spad. The world was a great place, after all. So it was only a joke.

DOWN the tarmac the pinto Spad rolled heavily, gathering speed as it tore. There was a tense moment when the overloaded Spad wouldn't come off, even under the skilled hand of Smoke Wade.

"Come on, Jake, old boy. Don't fail me now. Dig in your old toes and let's go, fella." He was talking to his pinto Spad like he had talked to old Jake back on the range when he needed urging.

Smoke felt the ship lighten. He tried the stick. The Spad wavered, rose sluggishly, came off a foot. But quickly he set her down and gave her more roll on the wheels.

Then, suddenly, as they neared the end of the tarmac, and it seemed that she would be mired forever in the mud beyond, he picked the wheels off the hard surface and, with the skill of an expert

which he was, held her while she struggled to gain safe flying speed.

His great hand patted the cowling of the cockpit before him.

“There, old fellow. I knew you’d make it.”

Smoke opened the map that the colonel had given to him and got his bearings. The ship seemed sluggish and reluctant. Slowly it climbed higher and higher, but it was battling all the way.

“Old bombs sure do hang heavy on yuh, don’t they, boy?”

Faster and faster he neared the front and his objective. But one thing perplexed him. Smoke Wade knew that portion of the front like a book. What troubled him was that he could think of no gorge in the location mentioned in the orders. But perhaps he was wrong. He couldn’t know every foot of ground on that part of the front.

As he roared toward the front, he turned and glanced over his shoulder. To his astonishment, another Spad was racing toward him—coming at him at a faster speed than his own overloaded Spad could fly. Curious, he watched it approach, throttled his Hissos back to allow it to come even with him.

Gradually it crept up on him. Archie guns grunted up at them both as they hurled themselves over enemy territory. But they were too high and they tore on toward the objective. Now, as the other Spad crept up on him slowly from the rear, Smoke Wade studied the orders and his map. He stared down at the blasted earth in search of the gorge, but even with his keen eyes he could not see any trace of a gorge that would hide a whole battery of howitzers.

Then the other Spad was pulling alongside. He turned and waved. It might be someone sent out by the colonel. Someone to bring him back to the field at the colonel’s orders. He chuckled a little at the idea. With twenty-five thousand francs at stake and the getting of the battery himself beside, he could easily misunderstand the order.

Then he recognized the pilot. It was Quinn. The kid had come with him. The thought both angered him and made him swell with pride. The kid had guts—and liked him. He was willing to take a big chance to help. But Smoke Wade didn’t want help.

At that very moment, however, Smoke Wade had not the slightest idea how much he needed help, if he was to gain his objective.

Quinn was waving wildly. At first, Smoke thought he was motioning him to turn back and shook his head vigorously. Then he realized that Quinn was motioning him to turn and follow him.

Smoke seemed in a daze for a time. He hadn’t been able to find the location of the batteries from the orders. He took another squint at the location numbers on the orders and then at the map. The numbers on the map were a little blurred. He looked again. He was certain he was correct about them. Still, there was no battery or gorge down there where the orders said, and Quinn was highly insistent.

WITHOUT knowing just what decided him, Smoke Wade suddenly turned and followed Quinn as he finally veered east and raced along ahead of the heavily loaded pinto Spad. Minutes sped past. Minutes through which Smoke Wade flew in a perplexed haze of wonder.

Then Quinn was pointing. They were in rougher country now. Country that had gorges aplenty, and in another minute, Wade saw fire belching from one of the deeper gorges and knew his error. But how had Quinn known the correct location of those guns?

A flight of five Fokkers droned at them out of the north. Smoke saw them coming and shuddered. Shuddered not for himself, but for young Quinn. The kid who had so much guts and so little experience.

Wade half cursed himself for taking off his guns to lighten the ship and make weight for the extra bombs. If Quinn were shot down trying to save him, he’d never forgive himself.

Frantically he tried to motion Quinn back to the field. Tried to point to his gunless engine cowl to show him he was fighting a lone battle. But Quinn only answered with a grin and tore on toward the oncoming Fokkers.

“Good kid,” ventured Smoke, as he saw him lunge toward them. “But a damn fool.”

Desperately he tried to figure out the speed of his ship against that of the Jerry flight. Perhaps they would reach the gorge first—perhaps not. It would be so near that it wouldn’t matter. And

Smoke Wade left with only a six-gun at his hip to battle five opponents.

Down he plunged at the gorge that held the howitzers, with Quinn flying at the same level as before, ready to dive on the Fokkers as they came near.

Archie batteries that surrounded the gorge, let go with a deafening roar.

Smoke's thoughts came fast and furiously. He had but one chance. He must get down on the ground out of range of those Archies. Then, flying just above the ground, he must rush upon the battery and drop his bombs.

In this way the Archie batteries would have less chance of getting a correct aim upon that pinto Spad as he hurled at them in a wildly twisting course. But, in doing so, he would take up valuable time. Time which would give the Fokkers from above a chance to be there first and to intercept him.

He gritted his teeth, gripped the stick more tightly in a hand that did not tremble, and hurled down. The pinto Spad groaned from the strain of racing wind and overload.

Down, down, he roared. He could see Quinn far above him, coming down at the diving Fokkers. Quinn had the advantage of altitude. That would help him—perhaps save him.

SMOKE glanced up for an instant at the fight. One lone Spad chasing five Fokkers. He thrilled at the sight and at the same time his hopes rose for Quinn. The kid had a chance now. If he took it. He must take it. Get all he could while he was on their tails.

White tracers fluffed out from Quinn's Vickers. Quinn was hot on the tail of one of the Jerry crates. Then the Fokker that he pursued so relentlessly, suddenly burst into flames and crashed downward.

Smoke saw Quinn dart instantly at another Fokker before any of the Jerry flight knew fully that one of their comrades had gone to a flaming grave.

Again Quinn's Vickers belched death. There was a short pause in the firing and then a second Fokker nosed down like a dart.

By now the three remaining Fokkers had seen that two of their comrades had gone down at the flaming guns of that lone Spad that thundered at

them from above. Smoke was down flat on the ground now and, for the moment, out of range of the Archie batteries. He hurled on, hugging the ground, and raced over that mile that intervened between himself and that gorge where the howitzers hid themselves, belching death across the lines.

Quinn was fighting like a demon, tearing down on the tails of those three closely bunched Fokkers. Back and forth he kicked his Spad, trying desperately to draw them away from Smoke who, without guns on his nose, was struggling to reach the howitzers first.

Suddenly one of the Fokkers whirled with surprising speed and executed a half roll. Quinn, taken by surprise, darted under him, and the next instant Smoke held his breath and prayed for the kid who had fought so valiantly.

All four planes lunged. The three Fokkers; two ahead and the other riding Quinn's tail, like mad. Smoke Wade had time to see Quinn whirl out of range and come in again, just an instant before he reached his objective. Everything under him suddenly seemed to blow up at once as the Archie batteries burst into action in one last wild effort to save themselves.

Smoke pulled his bomb release lever with all his might as he thundered low over the edge of the gorge. He was too busy to look back to see what damage he had done. Too busy with his work to see how Quinn was coming.

Again he let go with his bombs. Then, like a flash, he was whirling out of rage again and coming in to drop his remaining bombs from the other side of the gorge. One thing he had quickly decided. He could do more damage by blowing in the sides of the gorge on the enemy guns than he could with his light bombs if he directed them at the guns themselves.

He let go with everything he had on the return trip. The front wall of the gorge had tumbled in on the guns, but not so successfully that they couldn't be dug out in a short time. Now he was blasting in the rear wall of the gorge. It would take days to dig those guns and their crushed crews out of that gorge and make them fit for use once more. Long before that time the Allied troops, whose advance they had been retarding, would be in possession of the location.

AS he climbed, with every bomb dropped, and looked about for the Fokkers and for Quinn, he felt a sinking of his whole body. Two Fokkers bore down at him from above. But that wasn't so bad.

The worst of what he saw was that Quinn, prop stuck straight across, was steadily going down on the other side of a wood, apparently endeavoring frantically to land safely, while the plane with which he had been in combat when last he saw him was veering northward, black smoke pouring from its motor cowling.

One of the Fokkers lunged at him. The other turned and pursued the helpless Spad that was trying so bravely to get down, even though in enemy territory.

Smoke cursed aloud. His six-gun was in his hand, but below the cowling. He lowered his nose and tore in at the oncoming Fokker. Nearer and nearer they speeded at each other. The Spandaus were silent. The Jerry pilot knew that he would have little or no chance of killing his opponent from that angle.

He must wait. He must wait until Smoke swerved.

But Smoke hadn't been on the front for months for nothing. He, too, knew that the first man who swerved would be the dead pilot. His gun hand itched to be pulling the trigger of his six-gun. It was a chance in a million. He was a good shot. But circumstances like this took a lot of real shooting. The first one must count.

He waited desperately. Hang on until the very last chance he could hope for to pull out. No matter what happened, the other must swerve first. Smoke gritted his teeth and hung on.

Then, when it seemed that neither of the two planes could dodge each other, when Smoke himself had all but given up any possibility of escaping a crash with the other, the Jerry pilot swerved in a dizzy vertical that brought his landing gear almost crashing through the prop of the pinto Spad.

And, at that instant, Smoke's old six-gun was out of the cockpit.

The three shots that followed came so fast they sounded almost like the staccato of machine-gun fire. The lead slugs tore through the bottom of the cockpit of the Jerry crate, and in that instant Smoke Wade knew that he had gotten his enemy.

Without even waiting to see him waver, without seeing him turn and begin to spin down in a mad whirl, Smoke turned and darted toward the spot where he had last seen Quinn going down behind the trees.

In his first glance toward the edge of the trees he saw the one remaining Fokker dive down over the field and then come swooping sharply upward. Smoke could hardly expect to get this fellow with his six-gun. That would be asking too much.

His heart sank and a lump rose in his throat as he roared over the field. He had maneuvered so that the Fokker was rising at the far end of the field.

That would place Smoke in the place of advantage, or would have, had he had his guns still mounted on his engine.

Down on the field a mass of smoke and flame hid Quinn's Spad. He wondered frantically about Quinn. No use to wonder. He was probably down there in the cockpit of that inferno.

Tac-tac-tac!

Smoke whirled in his seat to see that the Fokker had come sneaking around and was tearing in at him from the side. The Jerry pilot, still pouring steel at him, was pointing down at the field. Nothing to do now but land. He was forced to. He couldn't fight when the enemy pilot had such an advantage over him. He must think of a way out after he landed.

Smoke Wade felt his wheels touch the ground. Heard the Fokker gliding in behind him and he waited any chance he might have. But why should he have a chance now?

The Jerry pilot was climbing from his cockpit, walking toward him with self-assurance as he held a revolver leveled at his body. He uttered an order in German that Smoke did not understand. He waited for an instant. The Jerry pilot was at his side.

Suddenly, as quick as light, Smoke ducked inside the cockpit for an instant. The Luger spat, but missed wildly. Then Smoke Wade, six-gun booming, whirled and was shooting into the astonished Jerry pilot.

His prop still idling, Smoke shot a quick glance about the edge of the field. A sound attracted his attention on the other side of the Fokker. Cautiously he peered round. He could see a slight movement in the bushes at the edge of the wood

that skirted the small field. Shielding himself as well as he could behind his motor, he shouted an order.

“Reckon you better come out before you get shot full of holes.”

“Smoke, Smoke.” A voice was groaning his name.

Smoke raced to the edge of the wood. His heart leaped for joy as he found Quinn lying there, well hidden. It was all clear to him now. Quinn’s motor had been too badly shot up to get off again. He had fired it and then hidden in the brush.

“My leg,” Quinn was weak, trying to smile. “Can’t walk, Smoke.”

“Sure you can’t now, but before long you will again. Better ride for now. Can you hang on to my wing or had I better tie you on?”

“I’ll hang on to it.” Quinn’s mouth twisted in pain as he smiled.

Then, as Smoke carried him tenderly toward his own pinto Spad, past the Fokker of the dead Jerry pilot, he suddenly stopped short with a sad shake of his head.

“Too bad, kid, you can’t fly that Fokker home. It’d be a great stunt. But wait. I got an idea almost as good. He felt in his pocket for a match while he easily supported Quinn with the other. “Here, touch off that crate. That’ll make four enemy aircraft shot down or destroyed by you this morning. Not bad. And I’m a witness, too.”

And while the Fokker flamed as Quinn’s Spad had done a moment before, and running feet and hoarse shouts hastened to stop them from taking off, the pinto Spad roared down the rough field and into the air.

SMOKE questioned Quinn eagerly as soon as they landed. “But what was there that made you think I didn’t know where I was going this morning? What gave you the idea that you knew where the battery was?” Pilots were clustered about them as they landed. They had money bet against Wade—bet in a joking way. There had been one grand frame-up to take him for at least one bet.

“It was Stetson,” explained Quinn. “I tried to get you last night after I left. Stetson got tight over in town last night and I heard him bragging about hiding some of the information that came in yesterday morning and changing the location

numbers and the time for us to go over on the orders that were given to you before the colonel got hold of them. Gee, Smoke, I hope you don’t think the rest of us were in on that part of it. That’s what I was trying to tell you when you took off and you wouldn’t listen. So I had to come and let you know.”

Stetson had come in upon the scene. Smoke turned to him with a peculiar, twisted smile.

“Pretty smart, I’ll have to admit,” he informed Stetson. “But you were exceeding your authority some by changing those orders, I reckon. And there’s one thing you didn’t figure on. That rain last night. Guess you don’t know the fields around here. Those Frenchmen over at Ramou, whom you expected would get the howitzers before any of us, haven’t any hard tarmac to take off on when it’s like it was this morning early. Just a mess of mud, that’s all. You couldn’t take off of that field in a balloon after a rain like last night. Kind of slipped up on that, I reckon. And when you’re ready I’ll just collect on that bet.”

Stetson’s face was purple with rage. He was stunned.

“And if I was you, Stetson”—Smoke Wade’s voice took on a graver note—“I’d just naturally go A.W.O.L. for the rest of the War, before the colonel hears about this messing with the orders.”

“It’s a little late for that,” a voice snapped. No one had seen Colonel McGill standing behind one of the planes. “Stetson, you’re under arrest. And as for you, Wade, once more you’ve gone out alone to do the work of others against my wishes. Damn you, Wade.” Then, in a softer voice, as he laid his hand on Smoke Wade’s shoulder: “But, boy, I’m proud of you, damn you.”